

1-1-2010

Book Review. Pravina Shukla, The Grace of Four Moons: Dress, Adornment, and the Art of the Body in Modern India

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Recommended Citation

Jo Farb Hernandez. "Book Review. Pravina Shukla, The Grace of Four Moons: Dress, Adornment, and the Art of the Body in Modern India" *Western Folklore* (2010): 132-134.

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mediums were characterized as “hysterical,” a term that invokes the dominance of both science and medicine.

The strength of the McGarry’s work lies in her command of the literature. The book contains forty-two pages of notes and an extensive bibliography. Using primary and secondary sources, the author documents her thesis that while the history of Spiritualism has been neglected, it represents a movement that reveals the religious and political context of nineteenth-century America. She turns to newspapers and periodicals of the time, such as *American Spiritualist Magazine* and *Banner of Light*, to provide an intimate look at the people and politics of the Spiritualist movement. Historians, folklorists, and other scholars will welcome the book as a valuable resource.

McGarry’s writing style is academic. Recreational readers may find the theoretical sections challenging, but they will be rewarded with examples of Spiritualist practices and biographical sketches of major personalities. The New York medium Cora Scott, for example, hosted private “investigating circles” in New York that provided her with income and a public vocation uncommon for women of her day.

One can easily find instances of Spiritualist traditions alive and well today. In my opinion, popular culture abounds with books and television shows about ghost hunters and mediums that indicate that we are still curious about the possibility of spirit communication. Fascination with the afterlife has fueled local paranormal groups that sponsor ghost hunting tours to supposedly haunted locations. Equipped with tape recorders, electromagnetic detectors, and infra-red cameras, these groups have, like their Spiritualist ancestors, appropriated the language and method of empirical science to support their claims of ghostly phenomena. While their equipment represents the latest technological gadgetry, their quest for communication with the spirits of the dead would put them right at home with nineteenth-century Spiritualists, making the book relevant for our time.

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The Grace of Four Moons: Dress, Adornment, and the Art of the Body in Modern India.

By Pravina Shukla. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. Pp. xii + 500, acknowledgments, introduction, photographs, maps, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. \$34.95 cloth.)

Past cultural studies of dress and adornment have tended to be primarily descriptive, serving as excellent resources for identifying the multi-layered components that comprise traditional costumes, but less often placing these objects within a broader context that includes studies of the maker and the seller, as well as the wearer, of such materials. Too, such studies typically emphasized the dress and adornment used for special or ceremonial occasions, rarely paying attention to everyday wear; they also generalized, homogenized, and made anonymous the individuals who wear these costumes, rather than exploring the myriad

of individual variations that are revealed even within tightly drawn cultural or social parameters. Not every married woman of a given religion from a given village dresses exactly alike, for example; the choices each woman makes on a daily basis tell us as much about her as an individual as it tells us she is married, what her religious affiliation is, or that she is from that given village.

Pravina Shukla's fine book, *The Grace of Four Moons*, stands in marked contrast to these earlier studies, and may become a new model for the field. She focuses on individuals as makers, sellers, buyers, and wearers within the middle-class urban society of Banaras, the god Shiva's sacred birthplace, renowned for the quality and variation of the textiles and other adornments worn by its residents. Emphasis is on these individuals as "ordinary" people (although certainly some of the makers would surpass this adjective through the quality of their crafts); separate chapters on their specific living situations and clothing/adornment choices underscore the wide range of aesthetic modifications possible while still passing as "ordinary" within the particulars of their social and cultural groups. Having grown up in Banaras, and with a continuing strong family presence there, Shukla is in the enviable and incomparable position of having numerous and essential networks to facilitate long-term fieldwork.

India is widely regarded as a cauldron of divisions; nevertheless, despite regional, religious, caste, and economic variations, Shukla postulates a fairly consistently-held aesthetic regarding female beauty. Not surprisingly, given the importance of religion on all aspects of daily life, this aesthetic is inextricably linked to the identities, attributes, and even perceived personalities of their deities. Each god's mythological character requires a certain manner and degree of ornamentation; in a region with high illiteracy and a myriad of mutually-unintelligible dialects, the visual depiction of these beings with their adornments and accoutrements helps to bridge linguistic gaps without losing the crux of the sacred narrative. Gazing upon images of the gods is believed to bring good fortune, and as devotees display their ornamented selves to the gods they are similarly conscious of the secular gaze of other viewers: people dress within generally understood parameters that provide an unspoken characterization similar to that used to identify the gods. In other words, the decisions one makes on a daily basis about the kind and degree of ornamentation, the neutrality or brightness of textile colors and styles, and how it is all assembled are undertaken knowing that one will be seen—and judged—by an audience that is privy to the signs and symbols that each of these choices reveal. A continual process of self-assessment, reacting to this "audience" response, helps each woman creatively fine-tune the specifics of her body art in order to communicate specifics about herself.

To this end, assembling adornment layers is seen as each woman's primary daily creative act. This is particularly significant given the "backstory" of these objects of adornment: each was generally made by male artisans, sold to male shopkeepers, who, based on their visual appraisal of their female customer as well as verbal inquiry as to the purpose of the desired object, select a small number of objects from which each woman would then choose. It is also intriguing that many of the artisans are Muslim, designing objects for Hindi women. The cycle of influence among these male designers, male producers, male shopkeepers, and their ultimate female end users functions due to the general shared aesthetic regarding the limitation of possibilities that are bounded by tradition, technology, and creativity. Therefore, the creative act of assembling all of the

textiles and ornaments by each woman each day, the act by which she displays and communicates her identity and status, is not really undertaken alone, as it is the final step in a collaboration with a long series of (often unknown) men.

The challenge for each woman—as well as for each of the individual men in the series of designers, producers, and merchants that provide her with the materials which she personally assembles—is to balance individual predilections for beauty and practicality within the social and traditional parameters that are, locally, well-known and well-understood. Age-, gender-, caste-, marital status-, and economic-related constraints are indicated by these choices, and close the circle of creation, communication, and consumption that is the foundation of all material culture studies.

My biggest disappointment with this book is that there are few photographs, and with the exception of sixteen pages of plates in the introduction, the rest are in black and white. The emphasis that Shukla places on specific description and context of each component of her study leaves the reader wanting immediate visualization with glorious color photos to match each discussion within the text. Too, there is a certain amount of repetition of concepts and details, suggesting a need for more rigorous copy-editing. It is gratifying, however, that the designers, makers, sellers, and wearers are allowed to speak in their own voices rather than having the author paraphrase their comments: this editorial decision underscores the individuality of the range of choices available to each participant, how they make those choices, and why.

Shukla's concluding chapter includes a more generic review of the study of body art worldwide; she cites specific studies, books, and museum exhibitions to develop a fairly comprehensive depiction of the field. She also proposes a range of issues and considerations for future studies; detailed endnotes and bibliography help to steer the interested reader to additional resources. Well-researched and well-produced, *The Grace of Four Moons* is a welcome addition to the scholarly canon for a wide range of academic as well as more popular objectives.

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Ed. Note: *The Grace of Four Moons: Dress, Adornment, and the Art of the Body in Modern India* was awarded Honorable Mention for the Elli Kōngās-Maranda Prize (Professional Category), which is awarded by the Women's Section of the American Folklore Society.